

Innovator: Air passenger count reflects area's economy

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TRAVERSE CITY — There are many ways to measure the trends in Northern Michigan's economy — but among the most-telling might be the turnstiles at Cherry Capital Airport.

As the airport surges toward a half-million passengers a year — it was 476,767 in 2017 and trending up again this year — passenger counts continue to be an accurate harbinger of regional economic and business trends as much as more-traditional economic indicators such as home sales, property values and unemployment rates.

“2012 is really when Cherry Capital Airport started to see the economy coming back,” Airport Executive Director Kevin Klein said. “It became the new benchmark going forward in terms of passenger traffic.”

Klein has worked closely with the airlines serving Cherry Capital Airport and local partners — including the Traverse City Area Chamber of Commerce, Traverse City Tourism and local travel consultant Tom Rockne — to boost the airport's flight schedules linking the community to major service hubs in Detroit and Chicago, along with seasonal air service to Atlanta, Dallas/Fort Worth, Denver and New York City. Other major projects including the airport's recent runway extension are allowing airlines to fly larger aircraft into Traverse City, further boosting travel options for business and recreation travelers.

This summer, Cherry Capital Airport will offer an unprecedented number of flight options including:

— Delta Air Lines flights to Detroit (daily), Minneapolis/St. Paul, Atlanta and New York.

— United Airlines flights to Chicago (daily), Denver and Newark.

— American Airlines flights to Chicago (daily), Dallas/Fort Worth and New York.

Klein said another upside to the expanding flight service is increased competition between carriers for passengers, which has a positive impact on air fares, long a complaint with Northern Michigan air travelers.

“When we get more seats in the market, the more we get competitive fares,” he said.

Technology upgrades are also part of the airport's ongoing improvements. It offers free Wi-fi service throughout the facility, self-ticketing kiosks to serve travelers, it uses the Transportation Safety Administration's Pre-Check program and created a mobile app to allow customers to check their flight status, weather conditions and learn about the area.

“From a technology standpoint, the mobile app has been fantastic,” Klein said.

Physical upgrades to the now-14-year-old airport terminal are also in the works, including new carpeting throughout and a major electric system upgrade to install additional charging stations and electrical outlets to accommodate the large number of mobile phones, tablets and laptops used by today's travelers.

Klein said he's pleased with the steady growth in airport travel. He's seen other markets around the country grow too fast and not be able to sustain their passenger numbers, forcing airlines to curtail service that communities later have a hard time getting back.

"We've always wanted the incremental growth, to show that our market is trustworthy," he said. "We've worked very closely with the airlines to emphasize their areas of success."

The airport's growth also is having a major economic impact across the Grand Traverse area. A 2017 study by the Michigan Department of Transportation pegged the airport's economic impact on the region at almost \$1 billion a year. That ranks third among Michigan airports, trailing only the much-larger facilities of Detroit and Grand Rapids.

Going forward, airport officials are planning other improvements to the general aviation side of the facility and working with partners like the U.S. Coast Guard, the National Cherry Festival and Northwestern Michigan College on facilities, events and programming. Klein said the airport will continue to focus on its three major operational foundations — safety, security and maintaining a self-sufficient airport without local tax dollars or federal airline subsidies.

"We're set infrastructure-wise for the next 15 years," Klein said. "We did it right — we're not in debt with any of these projects."